

Should Women Fencers Wear Chest Protectors?

by Pamela Muir, Order of the Seven Hearts ©2013

Yes, unequivocally yes. Chest protectors should be worn for practice drills, free fencing and tournaments. Yet quite a few women participating in western martial arts do not. How come? Well, those plastic Barbie chests are unattractive. Men's chest protectors don't look any better and any plastic chest protector is uncomfortable and can restrict your movement. Even those that are separate shells inserted into a sports bra can be uncomfortable. Besides all that, a woman fencer may feel that she needs to appear tougher and so she forgoes the obvious piece of safety gear that highlights her difference from the men. I used variations of those excuses for years until another coach bluntly explained to me the long term damage that I could be doing to myself. I put aside my wrongly placed pride and began to wear one.

The potential for long term damage is the primary reason women should wear chest protectors. What could initially be ignored as just a bruise, may actually result in a more serious condition called fat necrosis. When the fatty breast tissue is subjected to trauma it can die or form scar tissue. Symptoms of breast fat necrosis may include lumps, deformation, and/or drainage. Though fat necrosis is a benign condition, it's symptoms can mimic breast cancer even on a mammogram, leading to more imaging with a sonogram or MRI, or even a biopsy. Besides the potential cancer scare, breast fat necrosis can be a painful and disfiguring condition.

Though not as serious as breast fat necrosis, injury to the breast can also cause calcifications, small calcium deposits in the breast tissue. Calcifications are not painful and they do not have any other physical symptoms that you would notice. However, the aftermath of a localized blow to the breast tissue, months or years later, may appear as white specks on your mammogram. These may form a pattern similar to that caused by some types of breast cancer, sending you once again for more images and/or a biopsy. Microcalcifications may not be painful or disfiguring by themselves, but the follow up procedures, once the specks appear on your mammogram, are painful, scary, and potentially resulting in permanent scars. I can tell you from personal experience, if you are in a high risk category for breast cancer, these microcalcifications from old bruises will be a recurring cause of worry for you and your radiologist.

There is a less obvious reason why a woman should wear a chest protector when working with a partner. It is simply considerate. Imagine fencing a man who was not wearing an athletic cup. Would you deliberately aim for the groin or would you try to avoid hitting him there, if possible? I will make the generalization that most people prefer to not deliberately hit a woman on an unprotected breast. As the chest and torso is a prime target area, if you are a woman who is not wearing a chest protector, you are putting your partner at an unfair disadvantage. In a drill situation, when your partner is required to hit you in the torso, wear a chest protector. Don't place your partner in that uncomfortable situation and compromise his or her training in the process.

Oh, and one more reason to wear a chest protector. That one blow, or worse, repeated blows, in just the right spot... it hurts!

Most of what I have said has been aimed at women, however men need to be aware of these issues as well. Whether you are a man or woman, in an instructor role or working as a training partner, ask, or nag, the women you are training with to wear a chest protector. It's healthier for them and a better training situation for you.

The fine, but important, print: Women, if you do notice anything unusual about your breasts, see your doctor.